Improving the group leaders' role

Following through on his promise to group leaders, Interim Laboratory Director Pete Nanos led the Senior Executive Team in a review of recommendations from Laboratory group leaders last Friday, (Feb. 7) and approved all of their key recommendations.

In his first remarks to Laboratory employees, Nanos said that he would be depending heavily on group leaders to immediately address improving business processes throughout the Laboratory. In addition, he committed to looking at ways to ensure the group leader's job "…is more doable."

The Process

All Laboratory group leaders were invited to participate in focus groups the week of Jan. 20; 159 of 189 invitees took part in a focus group and an additional 20 group leaders provided input though electronic survey. The discussions and survey focused on the elements of a group leader's job, impediments to performing that job, and solutions to perceived problems.

Results from the focus groups and on-line surveys were then referred to a 10-hour solution generation workshop on Jan. 30-31 attended by 31 group leaders, chosen to represent their peers across the Laboratory. Four subgroups first tackled the results and analyses; their definitions and problem solutions reflected a considerable degree of consistency: group management scope, group leader roles and responsibilities and issues and their solutions.

At the end of the two-day effort, the leaders chose a final, small team to take the final recommendations, research their scope and implementation potential, and make a presentation to the Senior Executive Team. Those small team included Audrey Archuleta of Communication and User Coordination (LANSCE-4), Deborah Bennett of Actinide and Fuels Cycle Technologies (NMT-11), Harry Dewey of Advanced Chemical Diagnostics and Instrumentation (C-ADI), Larry Hersman of Wright Langham Resource (B-2) and Geoffrey Reeves of Space and Atmospheric Sciences (NIS-1).

The small team took all of the group leader input, together with results of division leader focus groups and interviews with the associate directors. The team clustered recommendations and drafted issues statements and proposed solutions to make it possible to do the group leader job. The team also proposed success indicators and initial implementation plans, including timelines.

The Recommendations
Group Leader Roles and Responsibilities

The accompanying chart reflects roles and responsibilities that are common for group leaders across both technical and support areas. During discussion with the SET, it was also clear this same set of roles and responsibilities could be found at the division and associate director level. The group leader team explained that because of function and mission diversity, group leaders constantly move across the continuum of management and focus on items of importance at any given time.

Bennett, of NMT-11, who presented this portion of the recommendations to the SET, explained that the scope of the group leader job is fundamentally correct, yet the load is often

overwhelming. “To succeed with the scope, load and diversity of work,” Bennett said, “group leaders need authority and flexibility to make effective decisions, then accountability for those decisions is justified.”

SET discussion suggested the addition of quality assurance, environmental responsibility and communications to the matrix, then concurred that it represented the group leader roles and responsibilities.

Group Leader Preparedness and Effectiveness

Archuleta of LANSCE-4 presented the next section which defined group leaders’ needs for clear, realistic expectations that provide an institutional framework together with those specific for their division, and appropriate, timely and continuous training and development, together with tools to help meet those expectations.

The recommendation adopted by the SET was to implement a suite of training and development options based on professional needs analyses. A core training suite, referred to as “boot camp” in the presentation, would replace the existing required management training, which the group felt did not address group leader needs. Additional optional ongoing leadership development training would be made available to expand beyond the core set of skills addressed in “boot camp,” drawing on the Leadership and Management Institutes. And a third element, pre-position preparation, would fit with a more formal approach to succession planning, and provide needed training before a new group leader is named.

Additional recommendations made in this area that will require further research and evaluation:

- More formal mentoring of group leaders by division leaders
- Fostering a stronger customer focus throughout the Laboratory
- Evaluate the potential for a non-management technical career track.

Group Leader Authority and Flexibility

Archuleta also presented this section, which identified the issue that group leaders need authority and flexibility to structure their staffing and cost recovery in a way that best supports the group’s goals and mission. Among other problems identified, the current systems results in the creation of time consuming work-around that push the legal and accountability envelope, and that group decision-making is held up due to the current “one size fits all” system.

The solutions endorsed by the SET included removing institutional barriers to provide a suite of support staffing solutions that would meet group goals and missions. The structure defining how this will be done will be complete within 10 days. Among the features of this solution set is working with division and Human Resources (HR) leaders on organizational structure as well as staffing. Rich Marquez, associate director for administration, is the SET sponsor for implementing the staffing, training and development recommendations. The second piece of the recommendation, to redesign the Laboratory’s rate structure, will be implemented in time for the 2004 fiscal year budgeting and will be designed in such a way as to ensure that the cost structure is rational to the Laboratory’s various customers.

“We have so many overhead rates, we’re choking ourselves,” Nanos said during the discussion. “We’re losing important scientific work because people who would fund it can’t handle the sticker shock.”

Recommendations for further research and evaluation from this section included:

- Reassess the management and leadership roles of team leaders
- Reassess group ownership of certain job titles vs. shadow organizations (and the recommendation from Pete Nanos that we should buy services from those who do them as their core competency where that skill is not part of the Laboratory's core mission)
- Revisiting the secretarial pool as an effective staffing bridge
- Assessing the effectiveness of deployed support teams for potential additional applications

Chain of Command

This section was presented by Hersman, of B-2, who asserted that nonadherence to the chain of command exacerbates what he called the "interrupt and react crisis culture." He defined the problem as tasks coming to the group leaders from all over the laboratory, requests that are not prioritized, whose reasoning is unclear and that come without negotiable deadlines. Receiving these requests and tasks force group leaders to be reactive, diverting them from other areas of the management continuum. And they are often handed poorly conceived tasks that result in wasted time, confusion and sometimes little value added.

The topic struck an immediate chord with the SET, which also realized that changing this particular environment would, in effect, require a change of culture in the Laboratory. Nevertheless, they agreed that tasking must travel through the chain of command, at the appropriate level (associate director to division leader to group leader to staff) with divisions filtering, negotiating and prioritizing before passing tasking on to the group leader. Moreover, this is not direction to just pass-on taskings but rather to include filtering, negotiating and prioritizing as features of chain of command approach.

"As we make this change," Nanos said, "we can't mistake information flow for the chain of command. In the culture we are trying to build, information should flow freely up. We can't be paranoid about communications. When you receive information that skips levels, treat it as unevaluated information. Where information flows freely, people want to tell the leaders what is going on." That culture, Nanos said, is what he is trying to build at the Laboratory.

Likewise, he cautioned, a leader has to be careful "…never to be seen as taking action without following the chain of command; for example, going directly to the group without going through the division leader."

Following the chain of command for tasking led the SET members to another important discussion: the receipt of verbal requests or written directions from the Department of Energy and the National Nuclear Security Administration that exceed contract requirements. "We need to be sure that all letters of direction under the contract flow through a single point," Nanos said. "If they're proper to do under the contract, we will do them. If they are beyond the contract scope, then they must be negotiated." Nanos said he would clarify that single point of entry for direction and communicate it across the Laboratory.

Policies, Procedures and Processes

Harry Dewey presented this set of recommendations with its identified issue that current policies, processes and procedures have a 60-year history and need to be reviewed, weeded out,

streamlined, made understandable and useable and managed with an institutional change control system.

The current system is time-consuming merely in trying to identify what is applicable and current, and the tendency to develop work-arounds to fill the gap for missing or outdated policy creates concerns. In addition, policies and procedures come down with no involvement from those who have to implement them.

The Operations Directorate accepted the assignment to create a single policy office, using the quality assurance structure that is already being implemented. This policy office will conduct a complete review of current policies to remove obsolete policies; define differences between requirements, policy and recommended practices; and clarify the source and ownership of requirements. They also will consolidate and centralize the system and implement a change control mechanism and institutional pushback, where applicable. The Administration Directorate will collaborate incorporating its review and improvement of the Administrative Manual.

The resulting product will interface policy with the Enterprise Resource Project and business systems design.

Laboratory Service Center

The concept presented by Reeves, of NIS-1, will address the issue that it is often difficult, time-consuming or even impossible to get administrative how-to questions answered. “It’s not always obvious what organization has responsibility,” Reeves said, “excessive staff time is needed to track down answers and there is a lot of redundant work with each group or individual reinventing the solutions.”

The solution is a single Laboratory Service Center that an individual could contact by telephone or electronic mail. Nanos seized upon the idea, having implemented a similar service center or universal help line in the Navy. “There are companies that do this and do it well,” he said, saying that the largest up-front task is to refine the responsibility matrix. The Operations and Administration directorates will jointly tackle this task, with a hoped-for three-month time frame.

Group Leader Advisory Council

The final recommendation, also presented by Reeves, is the formation of a Group Leader Advisory Council to tackle the additional recommendations or areas of concern for which there was no time in the current, immediate timetable. He also said this group could serve an ongoing role.

Nanos agreed, but reiterated the need to quickly raise those issues that will impact policy in the daily operation of the business. “We don’t have time for a long, drawn-out process in that arena,” he said, citing the cost to make changes in the ERP once that project is taken off its current hold and moved forward.

John Immele, the Lab’s deputy director for national security, was named the SET sponsor of this council, which also will have a member on the Business Process, Policy and Procedures Council that is currently moving forward with the many business changes.

“You are key to the Laboratory’s success,” Nanos said. “Your suggestions and input will help us not only in the current crises, but also in molding the Laboratory of the future.”